

Remarks by Paul DeGregorio
Commissioner, U.S. Election Assistance Commission
to the National Association of Secretaries of States Summer Conference
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Thank you for this opportunity to address this wonderful organization and accept your prestigious Freedom Award. I would like to first thank NASS for selecting me for this great honor, which is indeed a highlight of my professional career. It is also notable for a St. Louisian to be receiving this award on your 100th anniversary. Secretary Allan Bierman, whom I first met in 1991 at the Midwest Election Officials' Conference in Kansas City, spoke earlier of that famous room at Brookings Hall at Washington University in St. Louis where NASS was formed during the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis. I've had the great honor of giving a speech on democracy and elections in that great hall.

I am honored to be receiving this award from Secretary of State Mary Kiffmeyer. I have come to know the Secretary fairly well over the past year. Secretary Kiffmeyer is a person who worked her way up from a poll worker to Minnesota's chief election official. To be a true leader in this world one must develop new ideas and be persistent. Secretary Kiffmeyer certainly qualifies as she pushed hard for the passage of the Help America Vote Act and even harder to get it fully-funded. I know her persistent calls to the White House and Congress helped to get the EAC confirmed and funding in place. For that I am most grateful to Secretary Kiffmeyer and to NASS for your continuing leadership and support.

I've also had the opportunity to work with your incoming President, SOS Rebecca Vigil-Giron of New Mexico. Secretary Vigil-Giron is also an impressive leader who cares strongly about HAVA. I look forward to working with the Secretary during her upcoming term as your president.

I've also come to know many of you during my career in elections. I think I first met Missouri Secretary of State Matt Blunt in 1976, when he was just 5 years old and I was running the campaign of John Ashcroft for Missouri Attorney General. Secretary Blunt's first act as SOS was to appoint me to his newly-created Missouri Commission on Election Reform. I had the great experience in the late 1970s of spending a lot of time with former Missouri Secretary of State Jim Kirkpatrick, who served for 20 years and was an icon in Missouri politics.

I would also not be standing here as an EAC Commissioner if it wasn't for Secretary Blunt's father, former Secretary of State Roy Blunt of Missouri, who is now in the Majority Whip of the US House. Roy and I worked very closely when he was MO SOS. When Congressman Blunt discovered that a local election official was not on the final list to be considered by the White House or Congress for the EAC, he strongly intervened and asked me to serve my country on the EAC. One thing led to another and here I am.

Of course I've met many of you before I got to the EAC and now even more in the past seven months. It has been an honor to travel to many of your States to speak to your local election officials.

I want to say a particular word about Leslie Reynolds and the great NASS staff. They know they can pick up the phone can call me at any time. I do not hesitate to call them. Implementing HAVA is a partnership between the EAC and many important organizations such as NASS. We need to know when we are going in the right direction—and when we are not. Your input is very important to me and I ask you to keep it coming.

Our work at the EAC

Now let me turn for a few minutes to give you some highlights of our work. It's been an incredible 7 months for the EAC. You may recall that it was at the February NASS meeting in Washington that the four of us made our first public appearance and our first public promises. I am sure you have followed that since that report, we have made significant progress in many areas to do what HAVA expects us to do; especially in providing assistance to State and local election officials. We are well on our way to fulfill the goals we set out at your February meeting.

As I am sure you by now you are aware, I am privileged to be working with three of the finest Americans you could ask for on a Commission such as this. It has been a real pleasure to work with Buster Soaries, Gracia Hillman and Ray Martinez. The four of us have worked by consensus in a truly bipartisan spirit—much like you here at NASS. Over my many years working in elections I have also found that bipartisan spirit around the country, particularly when I travel to your state conferences of election officials. Promoting the right to vote and the proper administration of elections is an issue everyone—regardless of party—can agree upon.

The four of us on the EAC bring our own life experiences to the position, which has been very healthy and very helpful in achieving our goals. Unlike what we often see in Washington, we are civil and respectful to each other. Because of the meager operating funds given to the EAC this fiscal year—but also with the determination to make a difference this election year—the four of us have served as both Commissioners and staff. We have divided responsibilities among ourselves to so that each one of us can provide leadership on the Commission. We have each put in 50-60-70 hours per week to accomplish our goals. And the four of us have bonded in the process.

Commissioner Ray Martinez and I have been responsible for reviewing the certifications from the States and facilitating the distribution of the requirements payments to the States, DC and the territories. I am pleased to report that as of today, nearly \$1 billion dollars has now been disbursed to 30 states and the District of Columbia, as many of you already know. Commissioner Martinez and I have worked together on this project and meet several times per week to get issues resolved, present our recommendations to our colleagues, and send the funds to the States — where they belong.

I want to now encourage you to use the HAVA funds wisely—and as you said you would in your State Plans. We want you to use the funds to make a positive difference for this November's election. Many of your plan's call for impressive voter education efforts at the State and local level. Now is the time to implement your plans and get that money to the local level.

I do have to admit that I am disappointed when I discover that there are some States who have not spent a penny of the Title I monies distributed to them in the spring of 2003. We should note that Congress is watching and this fact won't help our efforts as we continue to encourage them to fully-fund HAVA.

Another important project in which I took the lead but got good help from Commissioner Martinez and our colleagues was our effort to serve as a true clearinghouse of good election administration practices, as HAVA mandates. I am pleased to report that within a week we be forwarding an electronic version of our first volume of a Best Practices Tool Kit. As you may be aware, we conducted two public hearings that focused on the security, reliability and usability of electronic voting systems, and best practices in the use of Optical Scan, Punch Card, Lever Machine and provisional voting. We have now incorporated much of what we learned from those hearings—and from what we learned from hundreds of election officials, voter advocates and others into this important document. Our focus in this first Tool Kit is to share practices and practical ideas that might be used to improve the process of conducting this November's presidential election. We certainly recognize that each State has its own laws and regulations that may prevent officials from using some of the ideas. However, most of it you will find that our first Tool Kit contains simple common sense ideas that can help keep election officials out of trouble—and prevent problems some have experienced in past elections.

On June 28 and 29 we conducted our first meeting of the EAC Standards and Advisory Boards, on which many of you sit. Commissioner Hillman put in a lot of effort to bring officials from each State and the US territories together to discuss the administration of elections in the United States. It was a truly historic gathering, for such a meeting of state and local election

officials—together in the same room with a common purpose—has probably not occurred in this country for over 200 years.

On July 9, we held the first meeting of the Technical Guidelines Development Committee. The TGDC—as it is known is a 15-member body that is going to work over the next 9-months to produce a draft of voting system guidelines. I am pleased to report that the EAC appointed Colorado Secretary of State Donnetta Davidson to this important committee. I know that Craig Burkhardt from the Department of Commerce has already spoken to you this morning and gave you a report with more detail about the activities of the National Institute of Standards and Technology and the TGDC, including information on a national software library at NIST. I am the official Federal Officer for the TGDC and will be monitoring its work very closely.

Of course the EAC participated in our share of Congressional hearings, we traveled to many of your States to observe elections and to speak, and now that we are at the end of the fiscal year, are finally able to consider hiring a general counsel and an interim executive director, strange as that may sound considering all we've accomplished in the past 7 months.

I'll touch briefly now on an issue that has had wide-spread coverage by the media this past week. I am sure you heard news reports about Chairman Soaries recent comments about the need to discuss what the Federal government and what State governments might do if there is a terrorist attack or other disaster on or near November 2nd. I want to make clear that contrary to what you may have read in Newsweek or other sources, the Chairman did not suggest that we consider postponing or canceling the election—or giving the EAC the power to do so. He did suggest a discussion with the Office of Homeland Security and the National Security Advisor on whether there was some kind of planning underway in case of such an attack or disaster. Election officials have shared with us their concern in this area and we have passed them on. I expect you may be hearing more from us on this subject in the near future. I want to make very clear to you that neither I nor my colleagues want to say or do anything that would instill any kind of fear into voters. In fact, I am very uncomfortable even discussing this issue because anything we say may be misinterpreted. It is sad that in this post-911 world these are issues we now have to take seriously and consider very carefully.

The Award

I now want to focus in the few minutes I have left about this award you have given me. I want to thank Tony Sirvello and Robert Parten, the respective Executive Director and President of the International Association of Clerks, Records, Election Officials and Treasurers for nominating me. I have been very proud of my 18-year association with IACREOT.

The person I want to thank the most for allowing me to do what I do professionally and to achieve my personal dreams are my wonderful bride of 27 years, Kerry DeGregorio. Of course, my four beautiful daughters, Katie, Annie, Debbie and Emily have also been very supportive of their dad as he decided his lot in life was to promote democracy and elections all over the world. They have listened to many a boring story—but also heard dad talk a lot about the daily struggle for survival for millions around the world. And now a new listener has joined the family as my oldest daughter gave birth to our first granddaughter on June 27. I've already rocked little Victoria Ruby back and forth and told her about her right to vote.

This award is about Freedom—and I thank God for giving me the opportunity to witness and spread freedom to every corner of the globe. My own father, who along with my wonderful mother, raised 7 wonderful children, fought for freedom and risked his life as a Marine on Iwo Jima in 1945. My dad saw first-hand how freedom had to be fought for and defended. He and my mother, along with my 3 brothers and 3 sisters—and dozens of cousins and countless friends have been very supportive in my efforts to spread freedom and democracy around the globe.

- I saw the fight for freedom in war-torn Sierra Leone in 2000, where I worked with hundreds of young polio victims who would crawl up 3 flights of stairs just to hear me tell them how they could become voter registrars.
- I saw it in Nigeria last year, where thousands stood in line for hours in 110 degree temperatures just to cast a ballot.

- I experienced it in Siberia in 1993, where I witnessed elderly Russian voters walking for miles upon miles in the snow in below 0 weather, just to have the right vote in their first contested election.
- And I certainly saw the struggle for freedom in Albania in 1997, where 73% of the eligible voters came out to the polls and ousted the government in an election where polling place officials were killed and where 500 international observers like me had to be protected by armored tanks and vehicles.

Thanks to the International Foundation for Election Systems, also known as IFES, I have experienced first-hand the spread of freedom from country-to-country and person-to-person through free, fair and democratic elections. IFES, which is the world's premier organization when it comes to promoting elections and freedom, gave me opportunities I never dreamed of and allowed me to use my skills to help people from all over the world achieve their dreams—and to touch people with my head—and my heart.

Through all of my experiences overseas, I have had countless people tell me of the great respect they have for the ultimate beacon of freedom and democracy: the United States of America. From the nurse who took care of me in a hospital for 6-days in Longyang, China in 1994 after I came down with a severe case of dysentery, to a young man named Vadim Gore from Orhei, Moldova, who I met at a polling place in Moldova in 1999 when he was 19 years old. Vadim has written me nearly every week since that first meeting. I have mentored him, sent him money for a computer and books and given him guidance. Vadim now has a degree in English and good skills to find a decent job in the poorest country in Europe. Vadim Gore and his family have become an important part of my life—and an important part of who I am today.

I want to end my remarks with one final personal story to illustrate how we can make a difference in a stranger's life with a simple act of human interaction and kindness. This is a story of Helen Nuelle, a woman whom I met in 1968—when I was 16 years old and she was 52—the age I am right now. I met Helen on my 16th birthday, the day I began my job washing test tubes and glassware in the medical lab at St. Louis State hospital. Helen had just started back to work herself, as her two adopted sons were old enough to permit Helen to go back to work. I worked at the hospital for the next 5 years and had lunch with Helen nearly every day I could. I became friends with Helen and her family. After I left that job to get into politics and elections, Helen and I would continue to stay friends and she would enjoy hearing about my career. She would become an important part of my life and that of my family. Helen Nuelle was a fiercely independent woman who was very opinionated. She was orphaned as a young child and struggled like many others during the Great Depression. Helen didn't care for big shots and never hesitated to cut me down to size if she thought I was getting too big for my britches. I loved every minute of it and learned a lot from the wonderful woman, who lived much of her life as if she was still in the Great Depression.

In 1992, Helen's dear husband of nearly 50 years died of a heart attack. She quickly sunk into a depression. As busy as my life was at that time I helped to nurse her out of it. For the next 11 years, I had lunch with Helen at our favorite Italian restaurant, Pietro's, at least twice per month. We would often reminisce about our days at State Hospital. I encouraged Helen into taking her first cruise—which she loved so much she went on at least one cruise a year for the rest of her life.

Into her 80s, Helen fell in love with the internet and e-mail. She would e-mail me every day to let me know about the St. Louis weather and the St. Louis Cardinals (although she was diehard Chicago Cub fan). I told Helen about my friend Vadim from Moldova, who, like her, loved to send e-mails. She asked to write Vadim. Subsequently, this 20 year old from Moldova became fast friends with the 84 year old American. For the next 4 years Helen and Vadim made an important impact on each other's lives—even though they never met face-to-face.

In 1997, I was having lunch with Helen at Pietro's just days after a trip to Albania. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch ran a story about my Albania experience and the owner of the restaurant, someone I knew from childhood, mentioned that he recently hired a 21-year old young man who had just immigrated to America from Albania with his parents. Helen told the owner to bring the young man, who was then a busboy, to our table.

It was then when I met Arian Cala. Arian told us in his broken English that he and his parents came to America to seek freedom from one of the most repressive communist regimes mankind had ever seen, that of a dictator named Enver Hoja. Arian told us that day that his dream was get a degree in engineering and a good job to that he could support his parents. I told Arian that I was the Director of Outreach for the University of Missouri-St. Louis and offered to advise him. The next day Arian showed up at my University office and we discussed how he could get that degree. I gave him some advice on how to pursue his dream. During my frequent visits with Helen to Pietro's, we would ask for Arian, and eventually he became our favorite waiter. Helen and I would encourage Arian and give him big tips, which he could use to help pay for his education. We met Arian's wonderful parents, Mico and Liri, who lived with Arian in a small 3-room unairconditioned apartment in St. Louis. Arian's mom had been a teacher in Albania; in America she cleaned rooms at the Adams Mark. Arian's dad was an expert woodworker in Albania; in America he rode 3 buses to load wood in a St. Louis hardware store. Both of them gave Arian all the support and encouragement they possibly could—as did Helen and I. Arian received a partial scholarship to the University of Missouri at Rolla school of engineering and Helen, at the age of 84, drove with Arian to help him find an apartment in Rolla, Missouri, for her eldest son had graduated from the same school.

In 2002, Arian graduated with honors and Helen and I, along with Arian's mom and dad and many of his loyal restaurant customers traveled to Rolla, Missouri to witness the important event and then back to Pietro's to celebrate this great achievement in Arian's life. A few months later, we were all back at Pietro's again celebrating another great achievement and the newest citizen of the United States of American—Arian Cala.

Today, Arian has a very responsible position with Shell Oil Company right here in New Orleans. He works hard every day to ensure that America has the energy we need. Arian Cala represents the essence of freedom and opportunity in the United States of America. He looks forward to casting his first vote in the November election. Arian Cala is living the dream that my four grandparents, who immigrated to America from Sicily in the early 1920s, pursued all of their life as well.

I'd like to ask my friend Arian Cala to stand up and be recognized, for he is here representing my family and friends today as I receive this award.

Time won't allow me to share with you similar stories about Rokas, Roman, Alexandru, Alex, Igor, Ilya, Ionel, Laurentu, Angela, Tamara, Gabriel, Victor, Vadim, Vladimir, Procop, Boris, Genci, Xhenu, the nurse from China, and Patrick James Taylor, the polio victim from Sierra Leone, to name a few. These young people who helped me along the way and who seek freedom and opportunity have made a difference in my life—and I in theirs.

I now want to conclude my remarks by telling you about my appearance in Minneapolis on December 12, 2003. Secretary Kiffmeyer asked me to come to Minnesota to speak to the Minnesota election officials. What was noteworthy about that speech was that it was the first official remarks I gave to election officials after my confirmation by the United States Senate just 3 days earlier. December 12, as it turns out, is a date that has had much meaning for me; it is sister's birthday; it was on December 12 that the Russians had their very first contested election—and I was there to help them with that election. It was on December 12 that Bush v Gore was decided by the Supreme Court in 2000. And finally, it was on December 12, 2003, during the exact time I was giving that important speech in Minneapolis, that my dear friend, Helen Nuelle, passed away at the age of 88 after a long illness. She knew of my new position and was very happy for me. I was honored to give the eulogy at her funeral a few days later—and read a beautiful note from her friend Vadim and talk about the impact Helen had on Arian Cala and others—especially me.

So you see I am a product of all the wonderful people I have met along the way in my 52 years. People who have made a difference in my life—and I in theirs. I dedicate this award to each and every one of them and thank God for the guidance he has given me each step of the way.

And finally I give my thanks to all of you for giving me the opportunity to be a part of your life—and for making a difference in mine.